Government-Press Relations in Alberta

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It has been argued that the news media are almost institutionalized players in the parliamentary process. For example, Frederick Fletcher, in his book The Newspaper and Public Affairs, states,

> "The competition between a government anxious to look good and opposition parties striving to reveal its feet of clay is central to parliamentary government, but it is an empty ritual without an audience. Thus the [press] gallery is a recognized part of the system through which the legislature performs its primary function of making the government accountable for its actions.[1]

Recent trends in Canada indicate that the media are adopting a more and more adversarial role in their relations with the government. In Alberta, where the opposition has traditionally been small, it would seem logical for the media to embrace the role of adversary with even greater enthusiasm. In fact, in 1979 the Edmonton Journal laid claim to status as the "unofficial opposition" in the province, and since that time, Alberta newspapers have attacked the government on a range of issues.

However, it has also been argued that the Alberta media suffer from "captive journalism" and that press coverage of government actions is sycophantic. Further, the extent to which the media can fulfill an "opposition" role is limited by the government's ability to "manage" news and by the structure and demands of the media system. This paper will examine the relationship between press and government in Alberta, within the context of trends in modern media and the nation as a whole. It will also discuss the extent to which Alberta newspapers intend to act--and succeed in acting--as adversaries to the government.

In general, the press plays a variety of roles in the political process. A key role is that of two-way information channel. The press communicates the actions of government members to their constituents and communicates public concerns to government representatives. It has been

noted that people receive their information from a variety of sources, which includes personal experience, other people, and the media. Dependence on media sources is higher for issues "with which the individual has no direct experience. Political matters often fall into the low personal information category".[2] On the other hand, the media also inform the decision-makers in the political process. Elected representatives often rely on the media for information on issues outside the range of their experience. Further, as a recent pamphlet published by the Research Branch of the Library of Parliament noted,

> "Members of Parliament read newspapers diligently, constantly measuring the amount and quality of coverage given them, their parties and opponents. Newspaper reports offer Opposition members and Government backbenchers ammunition for questions in the Commons; editorials appear to reflect what the public think".[3]

A second role which the press plays in the political process is agenda-setting. Most current research into the mass media accepts the agenda-setting hypothesis as a basic principle.[4] This hypothesis suggests that the press has the power to establish an "agenda" of political issues which the decision-makers and the public accept as the significant issues of the day. That is, the press may not be able to tell people what to think, but it can tell people what to think about. One way that the press creates news salience is through its "weighting system"--including the initial decision to accept or reject an article, headline size, length of article, article placement in terms of page number, and so on. Further, "press attention to an issue can move it onto the government agenda or give it a higher priority, especially if editorial concern is widespread or it stimulates public reaction".[5] However, as Fletcher states, official agenda priorities remain firmly in place and the media's ability to alter these is limited. This is particularly the case in Alberta, where the majority

position held by the Conservatives reduces their obligation to respond to issues raised by other groups and individuals.

The media also play the role of critic or "watchdog" in the political process. Political columnist Allan Fotheringham, for example, argues that "the media's job is to be against the government".[6] This concept of the media is associated with the United States, and developed out of American historical and political experience. The press, as watchdog, is a "fourth branch of government"[7]--a balancing force against the power of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Its functions are to analyse political issues, to pose questions, to investigate and criticize government actions, and to guard against government abuse.

Keeping these essential roles in mind, one can identify the recent trends in Canada which create a context for the Alberta situation. Anthony Westell argues that, in the past ten or fifteen years, there has been a shift in Canada from an "establishment" to an "adversarial" press. That is, traditionally, the primary responsibility of the press was to report the interaction between the government and opposition. The press didn't need to play an adversarial role because, unlike the U.S., Canada has an institutionalized opposition. However, Westell argues that recent developments have encouraged the growth of an adversarial press in Canada: the Watergate affair put investigative journalism in the spotlight; the influence of television is growing, with its emphasis on personality, conflict, and competition; current journalists were raised in the "adversary culture" of the 1960's and 1970's; and, the "new journalism" stresses analysis and interpretation more than simple communication. It is important, though, that the media's effectiveness as critic is restricted by reporters' lack of training in legislative and bureaucratic affairs, by

a lack of editorial support for investigative reporting, by understaffing, and so on.

Turning now to the specific case of Alberta, one should first examine the structure which is responsible for legislative reporting in the province: the press gallery. Alberta's press gallery has about twenty-five active members (forty in total). The gallery has grown in recent years, with an increase in the size of print and broadcast bureaus, the number of print bureaus, and the number of out-of-province correspondents. There are presently more broadcast outlets than newspaper outlets, but there are more reporters per newspaper outlet than per broadcast outlet. Newspapers are the dominant media group, because of their size and number. It is notable that Southam News owns both the Calgary Herald and the Edmonton Journal; however, as Fletcher notes, the two papers still seem to view each other as professional competition and there is no indication that directives for a common policy on coverage are ever issued.[8] With respect to the background of press gallery reporters, the trend is toward more formal education--in terms of journalism and/or the Social Sciences. It has also been suggested that, since there is no school of journalism in Alberta, many reporters bring an extra-provincial perspective to their work.

In Alberta, the focus of press gallery reporting is much the same as it is elsewhere. During the legislative session, most news stories focus on Question Period, because Question Period covers important current issues raised by opposition members. Further, Question Period fulfills most of the requirements for news, including immediacy, conflict, drama, and brevity. It may sometimes appear that the press opposes the Alberta government just because it reports the opposition criticism which takes place during Question Period. The impression of such an alliance would be

heightened in Alberta, since the opposition gets more press coverage through Question Period than it merits in terms of simple numbers. It is also interesting to note the "feedback cycle" which often takes place with respect to Question Period: opposition members draw upon press reports as sources for question to pose to the government; the press covers questions and answers in the House and often includes additional information and analysis; the opposition picks up on these reports for a new line of questioning; and so on. The process of influence is, clearly, complex.

The press also focuses on bills and Ministerial statements which come up during the course of the session. Naturally, the controversial issues receive the most attention. For example, this spring, Bill 59 (The Police Act) and Bills 71, 72, and 76 (dealing with accountants in the province) received a great deal of media coverage. This coverage probably helped to influence the government--albeit indirectly--in its decision to hold these bills until at least the fall sitting. Ministerial statements, announcing special policy or program initiatives to be taken by government departments, are usually summarized by the press and receive prolonged attention only when they are controversial.

Outside of session, many television and radio broadcasters leave the Legislature, but most newspaper reporters stay. The broadcasters return from week to week for press conferences and to keep in touch with developments on the political front. Much of the coverage of Legislature activity outside of session is "self-generated"--that is, reporters have much greater freedom to set their own agenda, instead of following that set by the government.

Given the tradition of one-party dominance in Alberta, it would be logical for the provincial press to adopt an adversarial stance toward the government. Since 1905, when Alberta became a province, Albertans have

maintained a unique degree of political consensus which has resulted in repetitive cycles of elections in which the governing party has been returned to power. Therefore Alberta Legislatures have always been dominated by a single party for extended periods of time--i.e., the Liberals (1905-1921), the United Farmers of Alberta (1921-1935), the Social Credit Party (1935-1971) and now the Conservatives (1971-).

Fletcher states in The Newspaper and Public Affairs that there is "a clear relationship between the numerical strength and effectiveness of the opposition parties and the commitment of reporters to the watchdog role".[9] That is, reporters tend to stress their function as "watchdog" more heavily in provinces with a small or weak opposition. For example, when a large Conservative majority was elected in Ontario in 1971, the Globe and Mail assumed an adversarial stance "in a self-conscious attempt to supplement scrutiny of government actions by the weakened opposition parties".[10] The effect of this phenomenon seems to be that the policies of the government in power are subject to closer examination by the press. Naturally, the press relies to some extent on opposition research staff for critical perspectives on government policy. However, it is important to remember that this alliance doesn't reflect basic ideological agreement. It is an alliance of convenience, and when opposition parties take office they usually face as much criticism as their predecessors.

Some Alberta newspapers have, in fact, endorsed an adversarial role for themselves in relation to the provincial government. After the spring election of 1979, in which Premier Lougheed and the Conservatives took 74 out of the 79 seats in the Legislature, the Edmonton Journal ran a reprint of a Globe and Mail editorial published shortly after the election. The editorial warned against the abuse of such an overwhelming mandate and

suggested that the Government should remain open and self-critical. It also stated that,

> "In this sort of situation, a special onus also falls on the press to provide some counterbalance to the risks of one-way thinking. Loyal opposition of a reasoned sort is vastly preferable to comfortable unanimity of view with the government, and should be gladly accepted as an obligatory press role".[11]

Journal publisher J.P. O'Callaghan endorsed this role more openly shortly thereafter. In the March 21, 1979 edition of The Albertan, O'Callaghan was quoted as saying that the election results meant that "the press must take over the role of the legislature's official opposition" because the elected opposition was "totally dispirited".[12] That is, the press should be responsible to report not only on Legislature activities but also on activities in the various government departments. Mr. O'Callaghan appears to believe that the Journal followed through on his endorsement of an opposition role: in a 1982 address to the Alberta Liberal Party, he stated, "I am tired of carrying the burden of unofficial opposition all by myself".[13]

Various Edmonton Journal writers have supported O'Callaghan's pledge to serve as unofficial opposition since 1979. In November of 1982, Journal editor Stephen Hume told a seminar group that "Journalists must constantly challenge, probe and question" and "newspapers must act as a watchdog for the public".[14] Hume has also written with approval of the adversarial relationship between government and press: "The government doesn't like us and we don't trust the government".[15] Hume argues, further, that the Journal has successfully performed an opposition role with respect to environmental issues. For example, at one point the Journal published the findings of a government study--previously kept secret--which confirmed heavy metals pollution in the area of Pincher Creek. The Journal also

disclosed the fact--previously kept secret--that hydrogen sulphide levels during the Lodgepole sour gas blowout in October of 1982 were high enough to warrant public concern.[16]

George Oake, former Journal legislative bureau chief, has been a strident and colorful critic of the government. At a 1982 seminar, Oake told students that since Albertans live in a "democratic dictatorship", reporters are even more responsible to protect the public interest than under "normal" circumstances.[17] Oake's metaphor-laden style of attack leaves no doubt that he tries to live up to this perception of the press's role. In a December, 1983 column, Oake lashed out at the "meanness of spirit" of the Alberta Tories, who let reporters freeze outside Government House during a caucus meeting inside:

> "As the scribes grew numb, Drayton Valley MLA Shirley Cripps and others could be seen peering out the windows, laughing at the reporters' discomfiture in the gnawing cold...laughing at the shivering unwashed".[18]

More recently, Oake wrote a scathing criticism of the Alberta Tories after their party convention in March of 1985. He referred to the government as "Albanian analogues...confused old puritans from The Sixties unsullied by the logic of The Eighties".[19] Oake pointed out the discrepancy between Consumer and Corporate Affairs Minister Connie Osterman's professed aversion to government intervention and her Department's aid to Northwest Trust and the Canadian Commercial Bank. He also dismissed the Education Minister as "Dave (no shirt too young to stuff) King and "Dave the Dilletante [sic]".[20] This column concluded with the observation that,

> "One has to look on our tired Tories with a sense of bemused mirth. They make the world fit their twisted views through paternalism, contradictions, hypocrisy, and they even go so far as to call on the Lord to make them more modest, an invocation that is the only hopeful sign in their illogical mutterings".[21]

In terms of general news coverage, there are some issues on which the Alberta press does not hesitate to attack the government. It is interesting that these issues usually fall into the realm of social and environmental concerns, rather than bread-and-butter economics, and emphasis is on style as much as substance. For example, press coverage last fall of the Social Services Department's handling of Richard Cardinal's case was uniformly scathing. Cardinal was a 17-year-old Metis youth who had grown up in foster homes in the province. He committed suicide in June of 1984. Early headlines on the case included "Welfare system blamed in suicide"[22] and "Government criticized in youth's death"[23]. An investigation into Cardinal's death produced the Thomlison report, which generated similar headlines. The Edmonton Journal announced "Report indicts gov't in Cardinal suicide--Memo describes blistering findings"[24]; the Edmonton Sun reported "Deadly 'Screw-up'--Report blasts welfare"[25]; and a Tony Saloway column in the Calgary Sun was headed "Bureaucratic bungling--Chronicle of chaos"[26]. The Cardinal case was a high-profile issue in the press from August through December of 1984.

The Environment Minister's handling of the PCB (polychlorinated biphenyls) issue in Alberta this spring was also subject to press criticism. After a PCB spill in Ontario in April, involving a truck heading to a storage site in Nisku, the NDP and Representative Opposition questioned Fred Bradley, Environment Minister, on Alberta's hazardous waste policy. Press coverage helped to create the impression that the Minister and his Department were incompetent and irresponsible: "Despite new provincial legislation to keep track of hazardous wastes, Alberta Environment was caught off guard by an Edmonton company bringing a truckload of toxic chemicals to Alberta."[27] The Journal reported NDP charges that "PCB levels outside a Nisku storage compound point to a

provincial minister who doesn't know what he's doing".[28] Headlines included accusations such as "PCB spill finds minister hiding behind regulations"[29] and "NDP charges deceit on PCB bonding"[30]. Journal columnist Don Braid wrote on April 20 that, "Ever eager to turn Alberta into a leading industrial province, the Tories have landed us knee-deep in the garbage business".[31] The adversarial relationship between government and press on this issue was underlined by Bradley's comments that media reporting was "irresponsible" and was causing unnecessary public alarm.[32]

Other examples of negative press coverage of public affairs include issues such as the Council on Alberta Teaching Standards and the Dial Mortgage Affair. In the spring of 1985, coverage of Education Minister Dave King's proposal for COATS depicted the Minister as high-handed and arrogant, and emphasized his lack of consideration for the Alberta Teachers Association as the self-proclaimed voice of teachers in the province. For example, in an April 4 article entitled, "King threatens to drop ATA from advisory board", the Calgary Herald reported,

> "The Alberta Teachers Association must endorse the government's new advisory council or it'll be prohibited from participating on the board, says Education Minister Dave King. King's threat Wednesday was the latest in what has become a full-scale war between the minister and the ATA".[33]

The press has also attacked the administration of justice in Alberta. The Dial Mortgage Affair, involving George de Rappard, deputy minister to Cabinet and former Dial official, has been the target of investigation and speculation by the press for the last eighteen months or so. Press reports have questioned, at various times, the Attorney General's decision not to lay criminal charges against Dial officials; the Attorney General's firing of John Faulkner, special prosecutor for the Department, for talking to the press about the case; the Attorney General's special directives for cases

involving prominent or controversial people; the Alberta Securities Commission's competence in its investigation of the case; and so on. It is interesting, too, that Premier Lougheed, commenting on the Dial Affair in March of 1985, said that it was a "witch hunt".[34] The Premier did not identify whom he felt was responsible for this "witch hunt", but the implication was clearly that the Alberta media were to blame.

Indeed, the adversarial relationship between government and press in Alberta is reinforced, to a degree, by the government's attitude toward the press. That is, the government sees the media as a "collectively hostile force" and the media are a "convenient...rhetorical target within the Alberta political milieu".[35] For example, Edmonton Belmont MLA Walter Szwender attacked the Journal at one point for its "continuous attempts to manipulate public opinion" and its "vindictive attempts to exaggerate [a] non-issue, the position of the legislature's Speaker Mr. Amerongen".[36] Szwender also dismissed the newspaper's "self-professed concern for democracy in Alberta through a stronger opposition" as "nothing more than a selfish cry for added media material".[37]

Relations between the Premier and the press are not always harmonious, either. The Premier has, in the past, been accused of "muzzling the press". For example, before Lougheed's trip to China in 1983, his press secretary announced that reporters would have to cooperate with the government delegation in order to get anywhere while in China. This led to critical reaction from both the NDP Opposition ("Premier muzzling press tour--Martin"[38]) and the press (Don Braid, "No soft nights on Orient trip"[39]).

Certainly, the Alberta government has been criticized by the media for cultivating a lack of accessibility to deter media attempts to reveal government irresponsibility or abuse. In 1979, Robert Cooper, host of

CBC's "Ombudsman" program, asserted that there is a "lack of co-operation [which] stems from the ministerial level--not the bureaucracy" that makes Alberta "the most difficult and most inaccessible of all [provinces].[40] The Journal agreed in an editorial printed shortly thereafter that "this isn't the first time the Lougheed government has been criticized on this count".[41] In a 1982 column for the Edmonton Sun, Harry Midgley compared Premier Lougheed to then-Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, accusing both of being "intolerant and insensitive toward the news media" and cooperating with the media "only when [they want] to use them".[42] Chris Dean, broadcaster for CFRN News, has recently commented on the "decline of access" to the Premier which has taken place over the years, including media availability sessions which now tend to be "fairly controlled" and "fairly short".[43] Dean also notes, however, that reporters have reasonably easy access to Ministers--including the post-Question Period "scrum" in which reporters accost Ministers in the corridors of the Legislature in order to acquire comment or explanation on a current issue. It is possible that this ease of access "compensate[s], in part, for the difficulties in seeing the Premier".[44]

It is clear that a case can be made to support the view that there is an adversarial relationship between government and press in Alberta. Not all Alberta journalists, however, embrace this concept of government-media relations. For instance, after J.P. O'Callaghan's announcement claiming the role of unofficial opposition in 1979, Calgary Herald editor William F. Gold wrote a column expressing skepticism at this claim. Gold argued that the role of opposition includes the improvement and amendment of legislation, and that "It's nearly impossible for newspapers to play that extremely important legislative role".[45] Neither, he stated, are newspapers capable of formulating effective alternative policies. Gold

allowed that press responsiblity to report government abuses and the views of the "disaffected" becomes more important in the case of a very large majority. However, he concluded, "our politicians tend to be overwhelmingly honest morally, if not intellectually".[46]

Current media representatives downplay the adversarial role of the press, too. Calgary Herald staff writer Wayne Kondro, for instance, perceives that although there is a greater onus on the Alberta media to oppose the government than there would be with a larger opposition, the media have not responded to this onus. In fact, Kondro notes that the Alberta media criticize the opposition as well as the government, sometimes expecting too much of the opposition for its size. He suggests that there is balanced media coverage in the province, including responsible levels of praise and criticism for both government and opposition. Chris Dean, CFRN broadcaster, notes that opposition MLA's receive more media coverage than is warranted by simple numbers, and that the media are probably more sympathetic to the opposition simply because of its size. However, he dismisses the Journal's 1979 claim to opposition status as "arrogant". In discussion, neither Dean nor Kondro could say whether anything had developed from this claim or whether the "policy" is still in place.

Journal columnist Don Braid, too, has stressed that the duty of the press is "non-partisan suspicion" and reporters should remain "non-partisan and critical" of all politicians.[47] Braid seems to follow through on this assessment, as he balances negative and positive coverage of government actions. For example, a Braid column in March of 1982 criticized the partisanship of the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, Gerard Amerongen:

> "Once again, as a new session opens, Amerongen has cut off opposition queries several times. Again he refuses to allow a hint of politics to creep into questions. Again the opposition accuses him of muzzling them and coddling the Tories".[48]

However, in April of 1985 Braid wrote a column noting that Amerongen's approach had changed substantially: He now allows a legislature question period with spark, heat, and humor".[49] Braid also acknowledged that Amerongen's partisanship was outweighed by his respect for parliament: "Even when he was infuriatingly strict, he believed he was acting in the legislature's best interests".[50]

Other Braid columns have dealt harshly with the Premier and Tory MLA's. For instance, before the Premier's 1983 visit to China, Braid wrote that the Premier's office was "warning that scribes who don't write friendly stories about the trade mission will be frozen out" and that "reporters will be at the premier's mercy".[51] An April, 1985 column reacted to the Premier's accusation that Alberta media neglect coverage of agricultural issues in the province and charged, in turn, that recent policy for farm fertilizer subsidies was "a blatant steal from the New Democrats".[52] On the other hand, in another April, 1985 column, Braid was almost sentimental in dealing with a Tory motion on teenage suicide prevention programs:

> "Often I've blasted government MLAs because they voice little sympathy for people in need...But this changed Tuesday, as several Tories nearly wept while debating a motion to expand suicide prevention programs for teenagers..."[53]

Braid went on to quote comments made by individual MLA's, and concluded, "Tories don't often say things like that. The change is welcome".[54]

Balanced press coverage is enhanced by the use of such journalistic devices as an "ombudsman". John Brown, presently ombudsman for the Edmonton Journal, handles complaints and comments about the newspaper's coverage of current affairs and judges whether or not stories on an issue or individual are accurate and fair. For instance, Brown's January 25, 1985 column focused on the George Oake column of December 21, which had

dealt with the Tory caucus meeting at Government House and the reporters who had been "forced" to wait outside in the cold. Brown carefully presented "the other side" of the story in his column, backed by quotations from MLA Shirley Cripps and press secretary Ron Liepert. In conclusion, Brown exonerated the government and said that "if the media go where they are not invited, they should not complain about not being asked to come in".[55]

More recently, Brown set the record straight on a March constituency meeting held by Municipal Affairs Minister Julian Koziak. A Journal story had created the impression that Koziak would not allow dissent from unemployed construction workers attending the meeting.[56] Brown, again defending the government, contended that the reporter responsible for the story had omitted facts which she should have included to characterize the Minister's actions more accurately.

Some critics have argued that the Alberta press is neither adversarial nor balanced. For example, Allan Hustak and Roger Epp, who have written about the government and the media in Alberta, both declare that the Alberta press suffers from "captive journalism". That is, "the examples of close and searching scrutiny of the government are the exception rather than the rule; a form of captive journalism is practised daily by the Alberta media; appreciation of Peter Lougheed is constantly promoted".[57] Hustak argues that, in earlier years, various legislative reporters were actually given directions by their superiors to practise "self-censorship", giving the Premier wide exposure and limiting coverage of former NDP leader Grant Notley.

Hustak and Epp also agree that the reason for media support of the provincial Tories is that the media establishment belongs to the same socio-economic group and embraces the same political conservatism as the

government. Former Edmonton Journal editor Andrew Snaddon, for example, has been quoted as saying, "I'm an Albertan inside the Canadian context the same way Peter is; we come from the same background and share the same reaction to things. Of course I support him".[58] Epp concludes that the province's newspapers "may have quibbled editorially about the appropriate size of a legislative opposition, but consistently have supported the Conservatives at election time".[59]

Epp and Hustak assert that individual pressrooms are, on balance, sympathetic to the Lougheed administration. For example, the Journal's coverage of Syncrude negotiations in 1975 presented Premier Lougheed in a positive light. It is true that in more recent years, the Journal has been responsible for the revelation of government mismanagement in a variety of areas. However, editorially, the Journal remains a "western spokesman" and supports the government in times of federal-provincial conflict. The Calgary Herald, too, supports the government's handling of "people issues" such as Social Services and Environment.[60] The Sun papers in Edmonton and Calgary do not hesitate to attack the government in their stories. However, their editorials are less adversarial and it must be remembered that their emphasis is on entertainment rather than on depth. The only exception to the captive press, according to Epp and Hustak, is the CBC. That is, the Premier is hostile to the CBC--and the CBC reciprocates--because the CBC is a federal institution in a provincial setting. It is also likely that the CBC's 1977 "Tar Sands" docu-drama--and the ensuing litigation launched by the Premier--exacerbated any conflict originally in existence.

Epp and Hustak present valid points to support their argument for a "captive press" in Alberta. However, one can make a few observations on their conclusions. Hustak's biography of Lougheed was published in 1979,

which means that his analysis of government-media relations is somewhat dated. To be fair, Hustak did note, at one point, that the Edmonton Journal became "more critical [after] the arrival in Edmonton in 1976 of J. Patrick O'Callaghan".[61] Epp's article, published in 1984, should have followed up on this point, updating the analysis of government-press relations in Alberta. However, Epp appears to have depended on Hustak's assessment of the situation and assumed that this assessment continues to hold true. While the "captive jounalism" argument has some value, one can question the lack of credit Epp gives to the press criticism that does, in fact, take place. In other words, one can argue that the element of captive journalism which exists in the Alberta press detracts from the ability of the press to act as adversary to the government, rather than destroying it altogether.

Having qualified the emphasis given to "captive journalism", it is possible to look at examples which show that, to some degree, it exists. In terms of general news coverage, there are issues on which the press clearly supports the government. As Hustak suggests, these issues tend to include economic issues--such as the petroleum industry. For instance, press coverage of the March, 1985 federal-provincial energy accord praised Tory Energy Minister John Zaozirny and his success in the intergovernmental negotiations. The Journal announced, "Hurray, says Zaozirny, of new energy deal, death of NEP"[62] and quoted the Energy Minister as saying that the energy pact

> "meets essentially every concern the province of Alberta has felt so strongly about since the unilateral introduction of the NEP (National Energy Program) back in 1980".[63]

Edmonton Sun captions trumpeted "Alberta got what it wanted--Zaozirny"[64] and "'Tis a famous victory"[65].

Some press coverage of the accord was overtly political. For example, one Calgary Herald editorial lauded the "New era for Alberta" introduced by the energy agreement and declared,

> "Perhaps the man who must take much credit for making the new prime minister hold to his promise is the one who was so badly burned by the original NEP that bears his signature--Premier Lougheed".[66]

Another Herald editorial attacked federal NDP criticism of the western accord and accused the NDP of being

> "a party dominated by intellectuals, academics, and Central Canadian unionists and with no understanding of the Alberta economy..."[67]

Press criticism of the agreement was limited to reports of opposition discontent with government secrecy on negotiations[68] and reports of NDP charges that the agreement "has a lot of holes".[69]

The press's enthusiasm for the energy agreement springs, in part, from traditional support for the provincial government in the context of federal-provincial negotiations or east-west tensions. It has already been noted that the Journal is a "western spokesman", standing behind the Premier in times of federal-provincial conflict. After the energy agreement was announced, the Journal ran an editorial titled "A new deal for the West"[70]. Edmonton Sun headlines declared, "Energy Pact rights wrong: Zaozirny--Feds 'off the property'"[71]. Another reason for the press's enthuasiasm springs from the similarity between the socio-economic background of media management and press advertisers. That is, those who support and run Alberta's major newspapers are involved in or dependent upon the provincial oil industry--and support the provincial Tories' approach to petroleum development. Fletcher's remarks on the national scene can easily be applied to Alberta: "It is true that the major media

organizations are themselves well-established parts of our present economic and political system and have no desire to undermine it...".[72]

Alberta journalists may limit themselves in terms of acting as adversaries to the government; moreover, they are further limited by the government's ability to "manage" the news in Alberta. That is,

> "Since 1971, what generally can be characterized as an attempt by the Lougheed government to assert more control over the dissemination of information has manifested itself in several ways, involving departmental staffs, caucus and cabinet, and particularly the premier's office".[73]

For example, in 1973, the Lougheed government established the Public Affairs Bureau, which distributes government information and assists government departments with their communications needs. The Alberta Communications Network (ACN), the government's teletype service, links the Bureau with provincial newsrooms for the immediate distribution of information about everything from Ministerial Statements and orders-in-council to fishing reports and cease-trading orders.

In Alberta, studies indicate that newsrooms outside Edmonton and Calgary view the ACN as an information network, but those within the two cities view it as a propaganda machine. Smaller outlets appreciate the detail with which the ACN covers local news and the competitive edge which the rapid communication gives them. The larger outlets argue that, although they have the staff and resources to deal with ACN output as government propaganda, smaller stations suffer from the "rip and read" syndrome (i.e., ACN releases are presented indiscriminately as accurate news). Both arguments have some merit. On analysis, however, the "bottom line" is that the ACN is a powerful vehicle for the government to communicate its own perspective directly to the public, bypassing the

interpretation and criticism which takes place through normal press channels.

The Public Affairs Bureau also assigns staff to each government department to coordinate communications and handle media relations. These "information officers" are responsible for news releases, advertising, brochures, presentations, and so on. Studies show, however, that most newsmen don't use information officers as sources, because "what constitute[s] news [is] political decisions, and...statements about such [can] only come from a political figure"[74]. In fact, some press gallery members argue that the chief aim of information officers is to avoid revealing information, and thus independent media representatives never have any reason to contact them.[75] There is a recognition, thus, that the function of the information officer is probably the exact opposite of the press's function:

> "The Public Relations men are paid to prevent exposure of the client when he is in significant error or disability; the press is paid to do precisely the opposite".[76]

The Premier also has a press secretary who is not affiliated with the Public Affairs Bureau but has a great deal of daily contact with the media. On the whole, major media representatives resent the press secretary because he acts as a filter, deciding when and to whom the Premier and Ministers will speak. Further, in order "to decrease the time demands made upon its people by the press, and yet to still allow full questioning"[77], the government sets up news conferences. The Premier, however, holds no regular news conferences. He either speaks to the press informally, with his press secretary running interference for him, or he schedules formal conferences at his own discretion, maximizing the effect of control, access, and timing.

With respect to Lougheed's personal approach to the media, it has been argued that "the premier has always regarded the media as an instrument to be used to convey a message, as much as possible, on his own terms".[78] Hustak's biography heavily emphasizes Lougheed's press connections, his talent for manipulating television images, and his grasp of the importance of communications in politics. In 1965, Lougheed established a communications committee to handle media relations and to evaluate his own public exposure. Hustak states, "He began by cultivating the owners and managers of the major television stations...and publishers and managing editors of the major newspapers"[79]--including those at CFCN and CFRN TV.

Lougheed has, by all accounts, succeeded in using television to convey his messages directly to the public and bypass the reporters and editors who usually act as news gatekeepers. Part of this success arises from his appearance--he has a "good corporate face"[80]--and his style--low-key and controlled, but not slick. Programs Lougheed has broadcast programs such as "Conversation with the Premier" (on CFCN and CFRN), which has been described as "nothing more than a thinly disguised commercial for the Conservative party".[81] Further, Lougheed has made direct broadcasts to the Alberta public--during times of federal-provincial tension--to explain his government's perspective and course of action. It is also notable that, when television was introduced into the Legislature in 1972, it was introduced on Lougheed's terms. That is, news cameras remain "virtually consigned to one corner of the chamber, which permits a frontal view of government benches but only a rear view of the small opposition contingent".[82]

The ability of the press to oppose the government is limited by the structure and operation of the media system as well as by news management. It is clear that, although the press plays a role in public affairs

coverage, public service is not its principal concern. Newspapers are commercial enterprises, and the commercial value of a story is always a major consideration. Therefore valid developments in the Legislature may be ignored or de-emphasized because they don't fulfill the traditional requirements of news (i.e., brevity, immediacy, conflict, entertainment, and so on).

The daily routine to which newsmen must adhere--including story deadlines and editorial expectations--further limits the press's ability to play an effective opposition role. Daily coverage of Question Period, for example, leaves little time for analysis, rational argument, and the assessment of long-term implications. Though press people may aspire to the interpretive and watchdog functions, they are "too busy with routine work to contribute to them except on an infrequent basis".[83]

Another constraint upon the capacity of the Alberta press to play an adversarial role is the turnover in the press gallery. CFRN broadcaster Chris Dean has noted that the press gallery undergoes waves of changes in membership that occur over a period of time. This creates problems in terms of the time it takes to learn the government system, to set up contacts, to acquire background on events and individuals, etc. Further, between spring and fall sittings of the Legislature, many press gallery members leave the Legislature and return only occasionally. Press gallery turnover and work patterns limit long-term investigative journalism, which would allow the press to perform one of the functions of an effective opposition.

A final observation which can be made with respect to Alberta's media system concerns the phenomenon of "pack journalism". That is, discussion and interchange take place among press gallery reporters--in the gallery, in the Legislature cafeteria, in the hallways--which contributes to the

similarity of stories filed by individual press people. In order to avoid missing a story and facing his editor's displeasure, a reporter will often choose to follow the pack. In Alberta, the Edmonton Journal acts as leader of the press gallery, because it is a large bureau and has a number of senior members in key posts. Some media representatives say that pack journalism is reinforced in Alberta by a lack of ideological differences among press gallery members and a dearth of controversy on the Alberta public affairs scene. In sum, pack journalism reduces the possibility of error or misrepresentation in legislative reports; however, it also discourages individual initiative, "homogenizes" press coverage, and causes serious problems if the leading judgments are questionable.

In conclusion, it is evident that these is a wide variety of forces which shape government-press relations in Alberta. The interaction between the two institutions is fluid and complex, and it is often difficult to distinguish between action and reaction, stimulus and response, influence and effect. However, it appears that a case can be made to support the argument that the Alberta press, like the Canadian press in general, sees itself as an adversary to the government. There are many recent examples of comments made by reporters, editors, and publishers--spoken and printed--which indicate that an "opposition psychology" exists among the Alberta press. The government reciprocates, as shown by the combative stance taken by some MLA's and the defensive mode adopted by others.

On the other hand, it is clear that not all Alberta press representatives agree that the press should--or can--oppose the government. Certain journalists and certain journalistic devices used by newspapers in the province indicate a willingness to pursue balanced coverage of public affairs. Further, an element of "captive journalism" exists which constrains the degree of antagonism in the press. Press opposition is

further curtailed by the government's ability to manage the news and by the structure of the media system itself. Given all of these considerations, it seems likely that in the future the press in Alberta "will continue to function as somewhat less than full-fledged adversaries of the government".[84]

Footnotes

[1]Frederick J. Fletcher, The Newspaper and Public Affairs, Vol. 7 of the Royal Commission on Newspapers (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1981), p. 49.

[2]Ibid., p. 16.

[3]Anthony J. Wright, The MP and his Information, pamphlet (Ottawa: Research Branch, Library of Parliament, 1974), p. 13.

[4]Fletcher, The Newspaper and Public Affairs, p. 16.

[5]Ibid, p. 21.

[6]Robert Sibley, "Truth is bottom line--newsman", Edmonton Journal, March 25, 1984.

[7]Fletcher, The Newspaper and Public Affairs, p. 7.

[8]Ibid, p. 64.

[9]Ibid, p. 60.

[10]Frederick J. Fletcher, "The Crucial and the Trivial: News Coverage of Provincial Politics", revised May 6, 1985 for publication in the Third Edition of Government and Politics of Ontario, ed. Donald C. Macdonald (1985), p. 7.

[11]"Deep responsibility", Edmonton Journal, March 20, 1979.

[12]"Media to be Opposition", The Albertan, March 21, 1979.

[13]J.P. O'Callaghan, "The tragedy is that there is so little hope for Alberta Liberals", Edmonton Journal, March 9, 1982.
Lethbridge Herald managing editor John Farrington also "agree[d] with former Journal publisher J.P. O'Callaghan's observation that the press is the unofficial opposition in Alberta while MLA ranks are so imbalanced" (Bill Sass, "Two MLA's concerned as reporter closes shop", Edmonton Journal, April 22, 1983). In this context, however, it is ironic that the Lethbridge Herald eliminated its Edmonton Legislature bureau in the spring of 1983.

[14]Judy Brachman, "Journalists must probe--editor", Edmonton Journal, Novemeber 17, 1982.

[15]Stephen Hume, "Press act challenge to freedom", Edmonton Journal, July 9, 1983.

[16]Stephen Hume, "This fetish of suffocating secrecy", Edmonton Journal, March 20, 1984 (excerpts from a speech to the Society of Environmental Biologists, Red Deer College, Red Deer, Alberta, March 17, 1984).

[17]Brachman, "Journalists must probe--editor".

[18]George Oake, "Freezing reporters give Tories a laugh", Edmonton Journal, December 21, 1983.

[19]George Oake, "Albertans have lost their virginity", Edmonton Journal, April 7, 1985.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Lorraine Locherty, "Welfare system blamed in suicide", Edmonton Journal, August 8, 1984.

[23]Richard Hoffman, "Government criticized in youth's death", Calgary Herald, August 9, 1984.

[24]Linda Goyette, "Report indicts gov't in Cardinal suicide--Memo describes blistering findings", Edmonton Journal, September 29, 1984.

[25]Carol Picard, "Deadly 'Screw-up'--Report blasts welfare", Edmonton Sun, September 27, 1984.

[26]Tony Saloway, "Bureaucratic bungling--Chronicle of chaos", Calgary Sun, October 2, 1984.

[27]"Waste-tracking system failed", Calgary Herald, April 18, 1985.

[28]"PCB's detected in Nisku ditch--documents", Edmonton Journal, April 25, 1985.

[29]"PCB spill finds minister hiding behind regulations", Calgary Herald, April 20, 1985.

[30]"NDP charges deceit on PCB bonding", Edmonton Journal, April 23, 1985.

[31]Don Braid, "Alberta's just a dump site", Edmonton Journal, April 20, 1985.

[32]Peter Stockland, "Media Censured: PCB's panic rapped", Edmonton Sun, April 26, 1985.

[33]Wayne Kondro, "King threatens to drop ATA from advisory board", Calgary Herald, April 4, 1985.

[34]Wayne Kondro, "Dial case called 'witchhunt'", Calgary Herald, March 8, 1985.

[35]Roger Epp, "The Lougheed Government and the Media: News Management in the Alberta Political Environment", Canadian Journal of Communications, 10:2 (1984), p. 61.

[36]Letter to editor from Edmonton Belmont MLA Walter Szwender, "Manipulating opinion not newspaper's role", Edmonton Journal, February 13, 1984.

[37]Ibid.

[38]"Premier muzzling press tour--Martin", Edmonton Journal, July 10, 1983.

[39]Don Braid, "No soft nights on Orient trip", Edmonton Journal, July 6, 1983.

[40]"Alberta gov't inaccessible, says CBC's ombudsman", Edmonton Journal, March 27, 1979.

[41]"Behind closed doors", Edmonton Journal, March 28, 1979.

[42]Harry Midgley, "Like Peter, like Pierre", Edmonton Sun, June 11, 1982.

[43]Chris Dean, press gallery seminar with Ontario interns, May 10, 1985.

[44]Socio-Systems Ltd. (Calgary, Alberta), The media and the Bureau of Public Affairs, prepared for the Bureau of Public Affairs, Government of Alberta (Alberta: Public Affairs Bureau, July, 1973), p. 18.

[45]William F. Gold, "Unremarkable journalism", Edmonton Journal, March 26, 1979 (reprint from the Calgary Herald).

[46]Ibid.

[47]Don Braid, column, Edmonton Journal, August 31, 1982.

[48]Don Braid, column, Edmonton Journal, March 9, 1982.

[49]Don Braid, "Putting bite in questions", Edmonton Journal, April 26, 1985.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Don Braid, "No soft nights on Orient trip", Edmonton Journal, July 6, 1983.

[52]Don Braid, "Tories steal from NDP", Edmonton Journal, April 2, 1985.

[53]Don Braid, "Oil pact puts Miller on spot", Edmonton Journal, April 4, 1985.

[54]Ibid.

[55]John Brown, "Column's charges must be backed up", Edmonton Journal, January 25, 1984.

[56]John Brown, "Two impressions of same meeting", Edmonton Journal, March 18, 1985.

[57]Allan Hustak, Peter Lougheed (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1979), p. 189.

[58]Ibid, p. 193.

[59]Epp, "The Lougheed Government and the Media: News Management in the Alberta Political Environment", p. 59.

[60]Hustak, Peter Lougheed, p. 194.

[61]Ibid, p. 194.

[62]Kristin Goff, Edmonton Journal, March 19, 1985.

[63]Daphne Bramham, "New oil pact called boon to industry", Edmonton Journal, March 27, 1985.

[64]"Energy pact sealed", Edmonton Sun, March 27, 1985.

[65]"'Tis a famous victory", Edmonton Sun, March 28, 1985.

[66]"New era for Alberta", Calgary Herald, March 27, 1985.

[67]"NDP ignores reality", Calgary Herald, March 30, 1985.

[68]Sheila Pratt, "MLAs want pact debated", Calgary Herald, March 28, 1985.

[69]Sheila Pratt, "Alberta gave up royalty control, charges Martin", Calgary Herald, March 30, 1985.

[70]"A new deal for the West", Edmonton Journal, March 29, 1985.

[71]Peter Stockland, "Energy Pact rights wrong: Zaozirny--Feds 'off the property'", Edmonton Sun, March 29, 1985.

[72]Fletcher, "The Crucial and the Trivial", p. 33.

[73]Epp, "The Lougheed Government and the Media: News Management in the Alberta Political Environment", pp. 41-42.

[74]Socio-Systems Ltd., The media and the Bureau of Public Affairs, p. 13.

[75]Chris Dean and Wayne Kondro, press gallery seminar with Ontario interns, May 10, 1985.

[76]Ben H. Bagdikian, "Journalist Meets Propagandist", Media Power in Politics, ed. Doris A. Graber (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1984), p. 337.

[77]Socio-Systems Ltd., The media and the Bureau of Public Affairs, p. 12.

[78]Epp, "The Lougheed Government and the Media: News Management in the Alberta Political Environment", p. 48.

[79]Hustak, Peter Lougheed, p. 189.

[80]Hustak, Peter Lougheed, p. 191.

[81]Ibid., p. 190.

[82]Epp, "The Lougheed Government and the Media: News Management in the Alberta Political Environment", p. 43.

[83]Fletcher, The Newspaper and Public Affairs, p. 60.

[84]Epp, "The Lougheed Government and the Media: News Management in the Alberta Political Environment", p. 61.

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